

# Optic Nerve:

## Points Way to Multiple Sclerosis Diagnosis

Eyes are amazing. Sure, they allow us to absorb all the beauty in the world and details of life. But, they can also offer the first clue into other health issues we had no idea about. Besides keeping ourselves in updated prescription lenses so we can see well, keeping tabs on our overall health is the biggest reason to get an annual eye exam.

We talked with Marty Carroll, O.D., to get his perspective on the value of the so-called routine eye exam. He's a VSP doctor in Cheyenne, Wyo.

"Take it from me, an annual eye exam can be absolutely priceless at times," booms the upbeat eye doctor. "I'm talking about situations in which the eye doctor discovers the symptoms of a significant medical condition – and then quickly refers the patient to medical care.

"In that kind of situation, rapid intervention can protect quality of life or even help save a life. How can you measure the value of that?"

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You can find a story underscoring these sentiments in one of Dr. Carroll's patients. The 34-year-old mom came in for an appointment – one she assumed would be routine. But, she'd been having some vision changes, so the exam couldn't have come at a better time. Dr. Carroll remembers the visit.

"When I examined the patient, she mentioned that she'd been experiencing some blurred vision and painful movement in one eye. She also reported a reduced ability to distinguish colors. As soon as I heard about those symptoms and also noticed that she had a discolored optic nerve, I went on double alert. Why? Because those indicators often signal the condition known as optic neuritis, which is frequently associated with multiple sclerosis (MS) in younger female adults."

It's true that other things can trigger optic neuritis, which is a chronic inflammation of the optic nerve. Viruses, bacteria – even some autoimmune disorders like lupus can cause it. But Dr. Carroll knew MS often lurks behind it. He explains, "Research shows that more than 55% of all MS patients will develop optic neuritis, which is why I start looking for possible symptoms of MS whenever I learn a patient has inflammation of the optic nerve."

Now, no one would want to hear that what seemed to be mere vision problems are suddenly pointing to something like MS. It's a serious disorder of the central nervous system, and it affects more than 300,000 Americans. More frustrating is that it's a somewhat mysterious condition caused by an assortment of factors and, to date, incurable. But, for Dr. Carroll's patient, better to know – because early detection and effective treatment can prevent the disorder's worst outcomes, including total disability.

"In this young woman's case, I was able to refer her to a neurologist who made the MS diagnosis and got her started on an effective treatment program right away. This patient was very smart – because she schedules yearly eye exams for herself and her family."